





# TRUTH in Numbers

Spay/neuter campaign changes the odds for pets in the Gulf Coast—and spells hope for animals nationwide

by NANCY LAWSON

**I**n a city still battling its ghosts, where husks of buildings languish in the shadows of shiny hotels sprouting like pop-up book pages along a highway buried in sand, the lunchroom of the Humane Society of South Mississippi was as likely a place as any to discuss matters of life and death one Thursday last August.

Crowded into plastic chairs near the soda machines, a handful of visitors from Baltimore and Atlanta were going into culture shock. Not because of the devastation that marred the coastline beyond the shelter for 26 miles, though that was jarring enough to see so long after Hurricane Katrina had flattened Gulfport—but because of what was happening, quietly and every day, inside this brightly painted, state-of-the-art haven for animals.

The group listened intently as the shelter's interim spay/neuter clinic director, Kim Staton, described the blue solution that lulls cats and dogs gently into a permanent sleep. They asked reluctantly about the procedures for placing dead bodies in bags destined for the landfill. They sat mesmerized as Staton explained the numbers: Sometimes 40 to 50 animals die in one day.

"I've had all of that that I can handle," said Staton. "As a human being, I've done all of that I can do."

Her guests had already heard plenty of statistics. Working with The HSUS to implement an outreach campaign that would change the paradigm for dogs and cats in the Gulf Coast, the team of marketing experts had studied the history of pet overpopulation for months. They knew that, nationwide, 3 to

4 million animals are euthanized every year due to a lack of homes. They'd read the extensive research undertaken by The HSUS in partnership with Maddie's Fund, a pet rescue foundation, to analyze the dynamics of cat and dog ownership in the region. And they were aware of the reasons pets end up in shelters, chief among them—at least here in the Deep South—the prevalence of too many unneutered animals generating litter after litter of puppies and kittens.

Just minutes before, they'd also seen the faces behind the numbers: those of sleepy Oscar, the tabby whose people were burdened with one too many pets and chose him as the one they could part with; bouncy Cookie, the young collie mix evicted by a landlord; and Big Mama, the year-old calico stretching her paws toward anyone who passed by. Big Mama's kennel card told a story repeated in shelters across the region: Her owners had given her up because they could no longer afford her care.

The likenesses of the hundreds of animals inhabiting the facility that day would haunt the cameras and memories of the visitors for months to come. But it was the countenance of Staton, a living paradox of a lifetime spent both rescuing animals and ending their lives, that stood out the most. With images of those she'd been unable to save embedded in her mind—the skinny old hound she'd picked up on her first call as an animal control officer, the sweet boxer puppy she'd helped nurse back to health but couldn't find an adopter for—Staton explained why death was sometimes the only option left, why it was her moral responsibility to stay in shelters until the tragedy ended,

and why she felt let down by previous outreach efforts that masked reality and treated euthanasia like a “dirty little secret.”

Asked by James Evans, the creative director and CEO of Baltimore-based Illume Communications, what she wanted the public to know most, Staton detailed the calculations necessitated by limited space and resources. Even though shelter animals generally have a better chance of adoption than in the past, there is still an imbalance of supply and demand. “I would try to make people understand that even if we find homes for your litter, it’s still another litter that means euthanasia for someone else,” said Staton. “Still, someone’s going to die.”

### MAKING THE CONNECTION

Eight months later, pet owners in the HSUS campaign’s three pilot cities have started to internalize that message, filling the appointment books of the Gulfport spay/neuter clinic weeks in advance and prompting the clinic director in Shreveport, La., to hire new staff just to accommodate the sudden influx of calls. They are responding to billboards, radio spots, door hangers, posters, outreach events, and most of all, to the echoes of Staton’s story.

Boiled down to its essence in a 30-second TV spot, the narrative created by Evans and his team is honest without being preachy, offering solutions without casting blame. “It’s OK, Cody, you’re a good boy,” says an actress playing a shelter employee, comforting a German shepherd before ad-



The HSUS campaign avoids pointing fingers at pet owners or shelter workers, emphasizing instead the need for a community solution. “There’s a human being on the other side of the door where you drop your dog off,” says James Evans of Illume Communications, shown here watching a spay/neuter surgery at the Humane Society of South Mississippi.

ressing the camera. “I’ve euthanized 34 dogs today, and I’m not sure how much more of this I can take. We fed and walked this boy for weeks, and now, we just don’t have the resources to take care of him. People ask: ‘How do you do that job?’ I say, ‘I don’t know. Fire me: Spay and neuter your pets.’”

In the final frame, viewers learn how many animals meet the same fate each year: 73,000 in Mississippi and 92,000 in Louisiana. And they’re offered a chance to do something about it—through a phone number that gives them access to affordable spay/neuter surgeries.

Many sheltering professionals have long shied away from the facts shared so boldly in the ad, concerned that knowledge of euthanasia might scare donors and potential adopters away from their organizations and ultimately lead to more needless deaths of healthy, adoptable animals. But if the reactions of pet owners like James Comans are any

indication, the opposite is occurring.

“The way it came across—it just touched my heart,” said Comans as he picked up his two dogs one February afternoon from the low-cost Jackson Spay/Neuter Clinic, run by Mississippi Spay and Neuter (MS SPAN). “I had found these puppies on the side of the road. There was a big truck that was going to come over the hill and run over them. They were just little tiny babies. I [saw the ad and] said, ‘That’s just a blessing ...’”

“Programs like this—it’s just wonderful,” he added, carrying away an armload of campaign materials to help him spread the gospel of spay/neuter in the community. “I’m going to try to come out and help out here as soon as I get these girls situated.”

The response of Comans—and of the 22 other people who cited the campaign as their inspiration for taking animals to the Jackson clinic that week—was just what the creative team had hoped for and what the two years of intensive research by The HSUS had predicted it would be. In a series of telephone surveys, focus groups, and interviews conducted from late 2006 until last fall, Mississippi and Louisiana pet owners revealed they were moved more by the thought of animals dying than by anything

**49%**  
of dogs in the  
Gulf Coast region  
are unneutered



**Illume Communications’ Annie Pruitt, who helped test the ad concepts, visits with a dog who reminds her of her own adopted pooch, Poly.**



else. The groundbreaking project, conducted as part of the organization's "After Katrina" initiative and underwritten by a grant of nearly \$1 million from Maddie's Fund, helped shape the direction of the campaign's messaging. By quantifying the extent of the problem and taking the temperature of pet owners and shelters across the region, the data provided a much needed baseline that has been all too often missing from past efforts to end pet homelessness.

"Our movement doesn't have nearly enough resources to do the job that all of us want to have done," says Maddie's Fund president Rich Avanzino. "Therefore, it's probably even more incumbent upon us who are committed to animal welfare to use our funds effectively. And I don't see how we can possibly address the multitude of issues without knowing where we've come from, where we're at, and where we're going."

To the surprise of longtime animal welfare advocates, the research revealed that the old standbys of pet overpopulation campaigns—animated dogs and cats talking about their sex lives, celebrity promotions of spay/neuter, messaging about the health benefits of the procedure, and holier-than-thou pronouncements that left pet owners feeling accused—were backfiring in the Gulf Coast region. People wanted factual information from trusted sources; they felt patronized by the star treatment and in-

sulted by the use of humor to illuminate such a serious topic.

"You look back and think, geez, why were we using cartoon animals to discuss a medical procedure or suggesting people didn't love their pets?

What were we talking about?" says Heather Cammisa, a former shelter director and manager of spay/neuter initiatives for The HSUS. "A lot of the promotions were not respectful; they did not recognize that people view themselves as responsible pet owners and love their animals. We really tuned them out to anything we wanted to communicate to them."

#### A COMMON HUMANITY

Hurricane Katrina demonstrated just how far those in Louisiana and Mississippi would go to save their dogs and cats, even when they had few resources to care for them. Yet it also revealed a shelter euthanasia rate as high as 80 to 90 percent in some municipalities, propelled by an extraordinary number of unneutered pets across the two states. A 2006 HSUS survey found that only 51 percent of owned dogs were spayed or neutered, compared with a national average of 70 percent; for owned cats, the fig-

ures were 77 percent in the region and 84 percent nationwide.

The numbers could not be blamed solely on the disaster. The storms that devastated the Gulf Coast in 2005 may have exacerbated the region's grinding poverty, but they did not create it. Funds from national organizations fueled massive rebuilding efforts; The HSUS provided more than \$8 million in reconstruction and recovery grants to more than 45 humane groups. But when the waters receded and the renovations began, it was clear that cash alone would not fix a problem that had been decades in the making.

As the focus groups and interviews began to show, it wasn't that people didn't care. Most often, they just hadn't made the connection, hadn't considered that their collective actions could be contributing to the deaths of thousands of animals. Even many who initially resisted the notion of spaying and neutering changed their minds once they'd learned about the end results of too much breeding.

"People would discuss at length how much it pains their heart to see a suffering stray and what a surprise it was for them to find out about the extent of the overpopulation crisis," says Cammisa, the project manager of the campaign. "They had this idea that everyone would want a puppy and that if their dog had puppies, they would just find homes for them. Finding out the numbers of euthanized animals in their states really touched people because it was in their backyard—it was relevant to them."

At the heart of any successful communication is the search for a common hu-

A question targeted toward people who may not have realized the number of litters an animal can produce turned out to be one of the most provocative messages. "I have had a lot of people say, 'Man, I saw that billboard; I never thought about it that way,'" says Matt Pepper, director of Caddo Parish Animal Services and Mosquito Control in Louisiana.



The below-average percentage of spayed and neutered pets in Louisiana and Mississippi contributes to a euthanasia rate as high as 80 to 90 percent in some shelters.

# IN LOUISIANA, 92,000 PETS ARE PUT DOWN EVERY YEAR.

[ Please Spay or Neuter Your Pets ]

call **861-0101**



Most people in the Gulf Coast are not ideologically opposed to spaying and neutering, according to the research, but many did not see the urgency until they were presented with the statistics. On billboards, radio spots, and TV commercials, the campaign explains the consequences of indiscriminate breeding.

manity. It's a simple notion but one that, at least in the animal welfare field, has often been overshadowed by the urgency of finding a solution and the tendency to forget the needs and values of the people on the receiving end. Shelter workers see the best and the worst of their own species, riding a seesaw of emotions during days so varied that they could be sending a cat home with a loving family one morning and euthanizing a dog beaten beyond recognition that afternoon. They are viewed as saviors by some and killers by others, doing the work of emergency-room employees but getting little of the gratitude accorded to others engaged in lifesaving work.

Out of this minefield often grows a reluctance to tell the truth—about their feelings, about animal suffering, about the ultimate plight of so many shelter ani-

mals—for fear that no one will understand. In such an environment, when the most important dialogues are locked in a closet, assumptions are made on both sides, leaving little room for constructive conversation.

“We don’t give the public the benefit of the doubt, [as if] we the people in the shelter are the good guys, and the public is the bad guy,” says Staton. “We haven’t done a good job of letting the public have this information and giving it to them in a way that they can understand on an emotional level.”

Early testing of the new messaging last fall drove home how much previous campaigns had missed the target, a fact encapsulated in the story of a man interviewed by Illume’s director of consumer insights, Annie Pruitt. Before the conversation, the man had never thought about neutering his Tiggy, a Pekepoo so beloved that he always got his treats even if it meant the man had to buy a cheaper brand of beer at Wal-Mart—or no beer at all. Sterilization was not an option simply because it would eliminate the possibility of some day having more little Tiggys.

But when the man heard the numbers

and began seeing the connections in the ad concepts that Pruitt presented, “he walked out of there saying, ‘I’m going to call tomorrow to get him neutered,’” says Pruitt. “He said, ‘I need to be a responsible pet owner and set the right precedent. How can I go out and tell people to spay and neuter if my dog is not neutered?’”

## TAKING IT TO THE PEOPLE

The success of any effort to change hearts and minds rests on the ability to create converts like Pruitt’s and generate what Darius Evans, chief operations officer and group account director of the guerrilla marketing firm GTM, calls “a community of passionate evangelists.” As the coordinator of the grassroots component of the campaign, dubbed Project LES/N (Lessen Euthanasia—Spay and Neuter), GTM hired and trained local citizens to talk to an important segment of the target audience—mothers and other heads of households—on their own terms and their own turf.

“You’re more likely to listen to a peer versus someone [you feel] is either a talking head who really doesn’t know what they’re talking about or who doesn’t know you,” says Evans, “or someone who’s kind of talking down to you or preaching to you.”

At parades, sporting events, and retailers like Wal-Mart, GTM’s one-on-one methods are reaping results. During a rabies clinic held in conjunction with the Humane Society of South Mississippi, nearly half of the 400 people in attendance took home vouchers for free surgeries.

The interest in free services is not surprising in a region with two of the poorest states in the nation, where HSUS research showed that even people with the best intentions often can’t afford to follow up without financial assistance.

“In some cases it’s a survival thing. It’s like with older folks—sometimes they pick and choose what bills they pay,” says David Waltman, who recently became the new clinic director at the Humane Society of South Mississippi. “Those are the folks we want to take care of; they are the ones who need our help the most.”

Before launching the campaign, The HSUS made sure that in each of the pilot



By ensuring that low-cost spay/neuter services were available in the three pilot cities of Jackson, Gulfport, and Shreveport, The HSUS and local advocates sought to address one of the region’s most significant barriers to reducing cat and dog population numbers. Shelter veteran Kim Staton describes the dilemma many face: “Do I put gas in my car to go to work, or do I have my dog neutered?”



cities, low-cost clinics were available to provide that help. Opened last September, Robinson's Rescue in Shreveport recently completed its 1,000th spay/neuter surgery and hired a new employee just to keep up with the response to the campaign. "We've had people who are just so grateful," says executive director Asunta Davis. "They're just about to cry on the phone because we're going to spay their dog. [For] a lot of these people, it was cost; it wasn't just that they didn't want to do it. And they're just beside themselves."

As the calls pick up at area clinics, animal protectionists are crossing their fingers that the numbers of baby animals being born will eventually diminish. In Caddo Parish, home to Shreveport, the municipal shelter's historically high euthanasia rate of 80 to 85 percent dipped below 59 percent in January. Caddo Parish Animal Services and Mosquito Control logged two and a half times more adoptions, rescue group placements, and reunions of lost animals with their owners than it did during the same period last year. "We have had some dramatic improvements to our facility, and I credit a lot of that to the increased awareness that these billboards and radio ads and television



spots are putting out there," says director Matt Pepper, whose agency has also benefited from the community collaboration inspired by the project. "It's given our organization a much better chance to succeed."

Time—and good record keeping—will eventually tell the long-term effectiveness of the initiative. Through the After Katrina project, 57 shelters in the region are providing six years' worth of animal intake and outcome numbers in exchange for grants of \$10,000 to \$20,000. And continued assessment of public response is helping the campaign's creators tweak their model into one that can be reproduced across the nation.

In the meantime, the woman who inspired them has moved on from Gulfport, but, like the campaign itself, plans to continue her mission across the country. "You've got to do what you can to get those numbers down," says Staton, now a consultant whose latest project involves working with a shelter in Montana. "While euthanasia accounts for a lot of burnout in a lot of [shelter] people, it really is the reason I've stayed in animal welfare

for as long as I have. Because as long as animals are dying, there's still work to be done. We're letting them be born. We're responsible. And we need to be good stewards, and I don't think that responsibility ends just because the job becomes difficult." ■

▲ [LEARN MORE](#) and view the advertisements at [humanesociety.org/spayneutercampaign](http://humanesociety.org/spayneutercampaign).

## What's in a Word? You Tell Us!

The HSUS's data collection project in the Gulf Coast left no stone unturned, down to the very words used to describe the deaths of animals in shelters. While some in the animal welfare community have long believed that "euthanize" is too euphemistic and others think "kill" is too harsh, research and testing revealed that neither term resonated with the target audience. Phrases such as "put to sleep" and "put down" were found to be well-known and ultimately the most effective, since they did not distract from respondents' absorption of the statistics themselves.

How do you respond to the terms used to describe the deaths of homeless animals in shelters? What do you think is the most effective way to convey the message to the public? E-mail your thoughts to [allanimals@humanesociety.org](mailto:allanimals@humanesociety.org).

